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ABSTRACT

Several writers suggest that reducing one's sense of individuality reduces social restraints. The author suggests that the effect of uniformity of appearance on aggression is unclear when anonymity is held constant. This poses a problem of interpretation given that a distinction must be made between lack of individuality and anonymity. One must hold anonymity constant if one is to generate support for the notion that lack of individuality reduces social restraints. The present research addresses this problem. Subjects, ostensibly participating in an empathy study, were asked to administer a stressful noise to a victim engaged in a learning task. Subjects were encouraged to aggress on each of 20 trials. Results showed that "hooded" subjects aggressed with significantly lower latencies than nametag subjects; and in the nonvisible cells, hooded subjects had significantly longer latencies than nametag subjects. It was concluded that the degree of anonymity provided to a subject affects perception of aggression severity. (Author/RK)

FULL ABSTRACT

ANONYMITY, DEINDIVIDUATION AND AGGRESSION[1]

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Several writers (e.g., Festinger, Papitone, & Newcomb, 1952) suggest that reducing one's sense of individuality reduces social restraints. To test this hypothesis, Zimbardo (1969) varied distinctiveness of appearance (subjects either wore hoods and lab coats or large nametags and their own clothing) and found that, in a group setting, Hooded subjects aggressed more than Tagged subjects. Since distinctive appearance should affect feelings of individuality (Singer, Brush, & Lublin, 1965; Goffman, 1961), these data suggest that a reduced sense of individuality weakens social restraints. However, it was possible that Zimbardo had confounded indistinct appearance with anonymity. His Hooded subjects operated in the dark, while his Tagged subjects operated in dim light. While in all conditions the victim was behind one-way glass, naive subjects often have a hard time accepting the fact that an observed person cannot see back through a one-way mirror to the observer. (Indeed, if they knew how one-way glass works, the Tagged subjects would have been correct in assuming that they were somewhat visible.) In short, Hooded subjects may have felt more anonymous than others and this rather than deindividuation (or uniform appearance) may have mediated aggression. Consequently, it is unclear what effect uniformity of appearance per se has on aggression when anonymity is held constant. This poses a problem of interpretation given that a distinction must be made between lack of individuality and anonymity (see Singer, Brush, & Lublin, 1965). For example, one might feel quite distinct from others and still remain anonymous. Given this distinction, one must hold anonymity constant if one is to generate support for the notion that lack of individuality reduces social restraints. The present research addresses this problem.

Zimbardo's manipulation of distinctiveness (Hoods and Nametags) and whether subjects were visible to the victim or not were varied in a 2 X 2 design which replicated the basic features of Zimbardo's (1969) study (see attached sheets). Subjects, ostensibly participating in an empathy study, were asked to administer a stressful noise to a victim engaged in a learning task. Subjects were encouraged to aggress on each of 20 trials. As in Zimbardo's (1969) study, significant effects emerged on the last 10 trials (see Table I). In the Visible conditions, Hooded subjects aggressed with significantly lower latencies than Nametag subjects. This resembles Zimbardo's (1969) findings. In the Nonvisible cells, however, Hooded subjects had significantly longer latencies than Nametag subjects (see Tables I and II). Control data revealed that the long latencies of the Hooded-Nonvisible

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subjects were due to their atypical perception of aggression severity (see Table II). Apparently, this somewhat redundant treatment combination suggested that the aggression was particularly aversive.[2] Consequently, this condition is inadequate for comparison purposes. Interestingly, however, Nametag-Nonvisible subjects had latencies that matched those of Hooded-Visible subjects. This finding is particularly noteworthy given that Hooded subjects, not unexpectedly, felt anonymous even when their actions were visible. (As can be seen from Table II, the only subjects who felt the victim would be able to later identify them were those in the Visible-Tagged cell.) Thus, assuring Tagged subjects of anonymity produced as much aggression as that observed in the cells where both uniformity of appearance and anonymity were present. This suggests that the low latencies of Hooded-Visible subjects were due to the anonymity provided by that treatment. In accord with this hypothesis, anonymity from the victim tended to increase aggression among Tagged subjects (who should have been maximally affected by the manipulation). Thus, there is no evidence that lack of distinctiveness per se increases aggression. Moreover, there was a tendency for subjects to report poorest feelings of well-being in those cells exhibiting the lowest latencies (see Table II). This finding contradicts the assertion that the aggressive behavior in the present experiment was mediated by a lowered sense of individuality given that such a state presumably leads to behavior that is inherently rewarding (Festinger, Pepitone, & Newcomb, 1952). Clearly, these data would be more conclusive if a meaningful test[3] of the simple effect in the Nonvisible cell proved non-significant. Nevertheless, the assertion that a subjective state of deindividuation (as opposed to anonymity) leads to a reduction in social restraints still is in need of empirical verification. While being indistinct from others increases non-normative behavior, given the present state of knowledge, it seems more parsimonious to interpret such effects in terms of the anonymity accompanying such states rather than in terms of a lowered sense of individuality. Moreover, that the degree of anonymity provided to a subject affects perception of aggression severity has clear implications for research on harmdoing given the need to equate perception of severity across conditions in such research.

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[2]Since these control data were obtained from subjects who were not required to aggress, it seems implausible that these findings reflect something like dissonance reduction for non-compliance.

[3]Such a test would require a less reactive Hoods-Nonvisible treatment combination.

TABLE I

Mean Latency*

Trial Blocks X Identity Cues X Visibility

Trial Block 1**

	Visible	Nonvisible
Low Cue (Hoods)	6.56 n=31	7.44 n=30
High Cue (Tags)	8.15 n=23	6.43 n=24

Trial Block 2***

	Visible	Nonvisible
Low Cue (Hoods)	5.71 n=31	9.01 n=30
High Cue (Tags)	8.79 n=23	5.98 n=24

*The dependent measure was the sum of the latencies in seconds over the 10 trials in each block.

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***Within Trial Block 1: Cues X Visibility (F = 2.1; 1,100 df; MSE = 2.75; .10 > p < .15).

****Within Trial Block 2: Cues X Visibility (F = 7.25; 1,100 df; MSE = 2.75; p < .01).
Simple Effects: Visible Cells (F = 4.56; 1,60 df; p < .05).
Nonvisible Cells (F = 4.45; 1,60 df; p < .05).

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TABLE II

Condition	Cell #	Mean Latency[1]	Control Rating of Distraction Severity[2]	Subject Well-Being[3]	Perceived Anonymity[4]
Low Cue (Hoods) Visible	1	12.66 (n=31)	26.2 (n=10)	70.77 (n=31)	18.84 (n=31)
Low Cue (Hoods) Nonvisible	2	16.44 (n=30)	17.1 (n=10)	62.83 (n=30)	18.80 (n=30)
High Cue (Tags) Visible	3	16.93 (n=23)	28.4 (n=10)	67.40 (n=23)	13.65 (n=23)
High Cue (Tags) Nonvisible	4	12.41 (n=24)	27.8 (n=10)	70.73 (n=24)	19.00 (n=24)

[1]The dependent measure is the sum across all 20 trials. Cues X Visibility ($F = 5.53$; 1,100 df; MSE = 9.0; $p < .03$).

[2]Low scores denote greater severity. Possible range 7-133. Cell 1 vs. 3 (n.s.); Cell 1 & 3 vs. 4 (n.s.); Cell 1 & 3 & 4 vs. 2 ($F = 4.47$; 1,30 df; MSE = 179.9; $p < .05$).

[3]Low scores denote greater well-being (how happy, relaxed, confident, secure, unconcerned, and pleasant). The possible range was from 6 to 114. Cues X Visibility ($F = 3.34$; $p < .08$; no other effects significant).

[4]Extent to which subjects thought victim could identify them. High scores denote high anonymity (range 1-19). Cell 3 vs. 1 & 2 & 4 ($F = 110.026$; MSE = 4.48, 1,100 df; $p < .001$). Residual ($F < 1$, 2, 100 df).

APPENDIX

Procedure, Manipulations, and Data Tables

108 female undergraduates participated in groups of 3-5 and received their instructions via tape. The study purportedly was investigating the relationship between involvement and empathic ability. As in Zimbardo's study, Hooded subjects were told that the hoods were necessary to assure that subjects were not influenced by the facial expressions of others. After receiving this information, all subjects listened to an ambiguous and neutral interview with the person they were to empathize with (the stimulus person--confederate). Following this, they were seated in individual cubicles and told that the stimulus person was participating in an experiment being run in an adjacent room which was investigating the physiological effects of stress in a learning situation. Thus, the stimulus person was to receive psychologically stressful noise while she worked on a memorization task for money. The subjects were to view her reactions through one-way glass.

Instructions for Aggression: At this point in the tape, subjects learned that they might be chosen to administer the distracting noise. The tape explained that two subjects would be randomly assigned to be actively involved with the stimulus person while the remaining subjects would simply observe and thereby provide a passive control group. Active involvement would be established by having subjects activate the distracting noise by pulling the lever labeled "150 deb--severe."

This lever could be pulled whenever an amber light located above the one-way mirror was illuminated. The light would go on once in each of the 20 memorization trials. The distraction would be transmitted so long as either of the actively involved subjects pulled their switch but would not be any greater when both switches were pulled simultaneously. It was not absolutely necessary that actively involved subjects pull their switches for the entire time the amber light was on. It was necessary for the subjects "to feel involved and for the stimulus person to undergo stress but aside from that (the actively involved subject) could leave the switch on for as little or as long as they wished" with the stipulation that the switch be pulled only once on any given trial.

This last segment of the procedure was designed to closely follow the procedure used by Zimbardo (1969). Specifically, the rationale for the aggression, the presumable random assignment of two subjects to the active condition, the use of a lever pull to aggress on signal against a visible victim engaged in an experimental task, the placement of subjects in individual booths, and the fact that the intensity of aggression did not increase when more than one lever was pulled, all were features of Zimbardo's study. The one aspect of the present study that varied from Zimbardo's was the decision to use distracting noise rather than shock as the mode of aggression. This change in procedure represented an attempt to minimize or preclude the stress reactions that have been observed in subjects in similar settings where shock has been used as the mode of aggression (e.g., Milgram, 1963). To further this end, subjects were free to aggress as little or as much as they wished and received no pressure or special attention from the experimenter if they failed to aggress. On the other hand, while the

aggression was not described as physically painful, there were two reasons for subjects to view it as an aversive event for the stimulus person. First, it supposedly caused psychological stress (as does chalk on a black board), and secondly, it presumably made it more difficult for the stimulus person to earn money during the experiment.

After the experimenter presented the instructions dealing with aggression, he stopped the tape and transmitted a sample of the distracting noise through the subjects' headphones. The experimenter then resumed the instruction tape. In this section of the tape, the instructions outlined above were summarized briefly and then followed the visibility manipulation.

Manipulation of Visibility (Anon-V): In the Visible conditions the taped instructions were as follows: "We will ask two of you to distract a stimulus person so that you may feel actively involved with her. To increase that sense of involvement we will arrange the illumination so that the stimulus person can see through the glass into this room. In other words, the stimulus person will be able to see what is going on in this room. However, the ratings you make of her later will be anonymous and will be held in the strictest confidence." These instructions were supplemented later in the experiment. After the lab assistant had set up the stimulus person in the testing room, the experimenter standing in a prearranged spot, asked the lab assistant over a microphone if she could see into the experimental room adequately. The lab assistant looked directly at the experimenter, and responded affirmatively.

In the Nonvisible conditions the tape was as follows: "We will ask two of you to distract a stimulus person so that you may feel actively involved with her. The stimulus person will be behind a one-way mirror. We will arrange the illumination so that although you can see the stimulus person clearly, she will see almost nothing but her own reflection. However, to make certain that the stimulus person cannot see your actions, curtains will be placed in front of all the booths, and in addition, the ratings you will make of the stimulus person later will be anonymous and will be held in strictest confidence." This ended the taped instructions. At this point all subjects were assigned to the active condition. Then the stimulus person was seated in the next room facing the subjects and the 20 distraction trials were completed. On each distraction trial, the amber light remained on for 5 seconds during which time the stimulus person exhibited signs of moderate stress. In all conditions, subjects were able to observe these stress reactions (the curtains used in the Nonvisible conditions had eye slits). After the distraction trials, the subjects completed a questionnaire and were thoroughly debriefed.